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ABSTRACT

A survey involving 125 students who voluntarily withdrew from the State University College at Oswego, was conducted to determine student characteristics and their reasons for withdrawing, as well as to examine suggestions for reducing attrition. Examination of the data suggests that seniors withdrew less frequently than did members of other classes, males and females withdrew at approximately the same rates, and students in Arts and Science tend to withdraw more frequently than did students in Professional Studies. The relationship between the student's major or concentration and the decision to withdraw was weak when enrollment was taken into account. It was found that students most frequently withdrew because they were not satisfied with their academic program, had changed their career goal, or had insufficient financial resources. On the basis of a PATH analysis (a specialized regression procedure), it was concluded that there was a weak but significant relationship between student characteristics, the underlying reasons for withdrawal, and the student's plans for the future. Suggestions from students on ways to reduce attrition include: (1) increasing programs offered; (2) increasing financial aid; (3) shifting emphasis of college; (4) offering educational counseling or assistance; and (5) changing housing accommodations. (SPG)

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Reasons for Voluntarily Withdrawing from the State University College at Oswego

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Robert E. Schell
Associate Dean of Students
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Oswego, New York
February 24, 1978

HE009690

We have been challenged to increase the College's ability to retain its students in order to realize several benefits. First, in an era of declining enrollments, increasing retention is a cost-effective way of reducing the impact of declining numbers of applications on our programs. Second, efforts to increase retention tend to have a simultaneous effect on all of the classes in the College, while recruitment tends to effect only the size of the entering classes. Third, and perhaps most important, efforts to increase retention tend to provide real educational benefits to students. Efforts to increase the number of applications merely are methods of influencing the choice of a college. The analogy here is rather like the difference between providing customer service instead of an advertising campaign.

Certainly, no one who has examined the enrollment figures of the College would argue that we can permit things to remain the way they are. From a political standpoint, it is difficult, if not impossible, to argue for increased levels of funding and staffing while the number of students served is declining. Davey Crockett of the American Testing Program brought this home clearly and bluntly when he reminded us that one definition of FTE is "full-time employment."

In the past we were forced to plan programs to increase retention on the basis of rumor and intuition. This, in part, may explain why we have not been particularly effective. We need to know more about the current state of affairs if we are to plan a desirable future. One approach is to develop a better understanding of the reasons that lie behind the decision of students to leave the College.

Although voluntary withdrawal accounts for only a moderate portion of attrition, these students have made a conscious and rational decision based on

information that is a potential benefit for those of us charged with planning retention programs. Why do they withdraw? Do the explanations that they give for leaving the College contain a core of information that might be helpful to us as we develop programs to increase retention?

The problem addressed in this study is: given information about the students who have withdrawn voluntarily from the College, the reasons that they have given for withdrawing, and their plans for the future -

a. determine the characteristics of students who withdraw.

b. determine the relationship, if any, between the students' academic major or concentration and the decision to withdraw.

c. determine the relative importance of the reasons students give for withdrawing.

d. identify the underlying causes for withdrawal from the College.

e. identify the patterns of interrelationships between student characteristics, reasons for withdrawal, and plans for the future.

f. examine the suggestions that students who withdraw give for reducing attrition.

The problem is both complex and ambitious. It will not yield to simplistic formulations and analyses since few students withdraw for a single, simple reason. Consequently, some of the techniques that must be used to solve the problem involve mathematically complex analyses of the data. To reduce this burden imposed by the mathematics as much as possible, many of the details have been eliminated in this report. You may be assured, however, that the processes and procedures used are consistent with current statistical practice and are available for scrutiny.

Method

Subjects. Those students who voluntarily withdraw from the College are

required to visit the Office of Student Affairs for an exit interview. During the period from December 1 to December 23, 1977, each student who visited the Office was asked to complete a survey form as a part of the interview. Of the 138 students who were reported to have withdrawn during that period, 125 (90.6%) responded to the survey. Their responses constituted the data base for this study.

Instrument

Students were asked to complete the Survey of Students Leaving the College as a part of the withdrawal procedure. This survey was broken into four distinct parts. Part I, Reasons for Withdrawal, contained 16 reasons drawn from a survey that was reported by Astin in his book Preventing Students From Dropping Out. Subjects were invited to check as many as five different reasons or, if they wished, to add a reason of their own. If a reason was checked, it was scored as a 1 for the data analysis, otherwise it was scored 0. Since the reason that students added to the list usually was an expansion of one of the reasons supplied, this option was not analyzed.

Part II, Plans for the Future, contained three items. Subjects were asked whether or not they planned to transfer to another college, get a job, and/or return to the College at Oswego. The responses were not mutually exclusive and a subject often checked more than one of them. A "yes" response was scored with a 1, and a "no" was scored with a 0.

Part III responses contained two incomplete sentences: I probably would not have withdrawn if the College had_____. The thing I will remember about Oswego is_____. These responses were not scored and were used primarily to validate the findings of the survey.

Part IV, Student Characteristics, contained four items which were scored as shown below:

Item	Contents	Scoring
1	Sex	Male = 1 Female = 2
2	Class	Freshman = 1 Sophomore = 2 Junior = 3 Senior = 4
3	Division	Arts and Science = 1 Professional Studies = 2
3	Major or concentration	Not scored

In addition to these data, information on enrollment by departments was supplied by the Office of Institutional Research.

Results

Characteristics of students who withdrew. The number of students who withdrew by class, division, and sex are shown in Table 1. Information for all three

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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of these classifications was available for 123 of the respondents. Examination of the data suggests that seniors withdrew less frequently than do members of other classes. Males and females withdrew at approximately the same rates, and students in Arts and Science tend to withdraw more frequently than do students in Professional Studies even when the differences in the enrollments of the two divisions are taken into consideration. This may reflect the fact that students in Professional Studies are more likely to be upper-division students than those enrolled in Arts and Science.

TABLE 1

Number of Students in Each Classification Category Who Voluntarily Withdrew From the College Between December 1 and December 23, 1977

	YEAR IN COLLEGE				
DIVISION AND SEX	FRESHMAN	SOPHOMORE	JUNIOR	SENIOR	TOTAL
ARTS AND SCIENCE	28	32	34	5	99
Males	13	18	16	2	49
Females	15	14	18	3	50
PROFESSIONAL STUDIES	4	8	10	2	24
Males	2	6	2	0	10
Females	2	2	8	2	14
TOTAL	32	40	44	7	123*
Males	15	24	18	2	59
Females	17	16	26	5	64

* Only 123 responses contained all three classifications

Relationship between academic major or concentration and frequency of withdrawal. In order to establish the extent of the relationship between a student's department and withdrawal, we posed the following question: "To what extent is it possible to predict the number of students who withdraw from a department given the number of students enrolled?" A polynomial regression equation was derived according to "least-squares" criteria to make this prediction. The number of students enrolled was taken from the data supplied by the Office of Institutional Research and the number of students who withdrew was taken from information supplied by students in the survey. The number predicted was subtracted from the number observed to yield the residual. These data are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 About Here

The relationship between enrollment and the number of withdrawals during the period of the study was statistically significant ($F = 32.234$; $df = 4,31$; $p<0.001$). The best fitting equation (quartic) had a multiple correlation of 0.827 which indicated that 82.7% of the variation in the number of withdrawals by department was accounted for by the number of students enrolled. The practical significance of this relationship was further illustrated by the fact that the standard deviation of the number withdrawing was 3.40 and the standard deviation of the residuals (the difference between the actual and predicted number) was 1.15. This represented a 55.4% decrease in the amount of variation in the dependent variable. It is a clear illustration of the enormous predictive efficiency of the relationship.

An examination of the residuals suggests that, for the most part, departments have similar rates of attrition. Several departments showed a somewhat

TABLE 2

Number of Students Enrolled, Number Withdrawing, Number Predicted by the Regression Equation, and the Residual by Major or Concentration

Department	Enrolled	Withdrew	Predicted	Residual
Business Administration 1/	743 2/	8 3/	6.8 4/	1.2 5/
Industrial Arts	733	7	8.3	-1.3
Psychology	339	12	11.4	0.6
Communications Studies	331	11	11.0	0.0
Biology	246	10	7.1	2.9
Computer Science	243	3	7.0	-4.0
Public Justice	210	7	5.6	1.4
English	188	5	4.8	0.2
Art	184	6	4.7	1.3
Political Science	184	2	4.7	-2.7
Sociology	158	5	3.8	1.2
Economics	133	2	3.1	-1.1
Mathematics	125	2	2.8	-0.8
Zoology	123	3	2.8	0.2
History	89	0	2.0	-2.0
Meteorology	81	1	1.8	-0.8
Chemistry	80	3	1.8	1.2
Spanish	71	2	1.6	0.4
Music	60	3	1.4	1.6
Theatre	49	2	1.2	0.8
Social Science	45	1	1.1	-0.1
French	41	0	1.1	-1.1
Anthropology	34	2	0.9	1.1
Geography	34	3	0.9	2.1
German	28	0	0.9	-0.9
Mathematical Economics	24	2	0.8	1.2
Physics	21	0	0.8	-0.8
Geology	20	1	0.7	0.3
American Studies	15	0	0.7	-0.7
Philosophy	9	0	0.6	-0.6
Russian	5	0	0.5	-0.5
Linguistics	3	0	0.5	-0.5

1/ Condensations of the more extensive list of programs and majors consistent with their use by students. It is a merger of official designations, registration designations, and common usage by students.

2/ Enrollment data as of December 1977 furnished by the Office of Institutional Research.

3/ Covers 90.6% of the students who voluntarily withdrew between December 1 and December 23, 1977.

4/ Predicted on the basis of the "best fitting" polynomial regression curve.

5/ ACTUAL - PREDICTED

lower rate than was expected - Computer Science, Political Science, and History. Two showed a somewhat higher rate than expected - Biology and Georgraphy. However, the numbers involved are so small as to make the practical significance of these differences questionable. We can probably conclude on the basis of these restricted data that the differences among departments are too small to warrant further investigation.

Relative importance of the reasons for leaving Oswego. The number of students responding to each of the 16 reasons that were given in the survey and the percentage is shown in Table 3. This table is self-explanatory. It can be seen that the most frequent reasons were: "I was not satisfied with my academic

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Insert Table 3 About Here

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program," "I changed my career goal," and "My financial resources were not sufficient." While the true nature of these reasons is not clear, the relative frequency of responses gives us some flavor for the problems that students have experienced.

Underlying causes for withdrawing from the College. The items contained in Table 3 were correlated with one another and as we noted, the precise nature of the items were not clear from an examination of the table; consequently, we posed the question of structure: "To what extent were the reasons given the result of a few underlying causes for withdrawal?" The intercorrelations of the items were subjected to principle component analysis. Components with eigenvalues greater than one were retained for rotation to the varimax criterion.

Seven distinct components were identified. The loadings of these components on the reasons are shown in Table 4. The seven underlying components were

TABLE 3

Number and Percent of Respondents Checking Each Reason for Withdrawing from the College

REASON	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENT OF SAMPLE
1. I was bored with my courses.	27	21.6
2. I had to meet other important family responsibilities	9	7.2
3. I was not doing well academically.	20	16.0
4. My financial resources were not sufficient.	35	28.0
5. I could not find a part-time job.	12	9.6
6. I did not receive sufficient financial aid.	16	12.8
7. I was dissatisfied with the academic requirements and regulations.	20	16.0
8. I changed my career goal.	37	29.6
9. I was unable to enroll in the major that I wanted.	13	10.4
10. I could not enroll in courses that I wanted.	20	16.0
11. I was not satisfied with my academic program.	39	31.2
12. I received an attractive job offer.	6	4.8
13. I became ill and was unable to complete my work.	3	2.4
14. It was too difficult to commute to the College.	1	0.8
15. I was unable to find a suitable place to live	5	4.0
16. I wanted to go to school closer to my home.	25	20.0

Insert Table 4 About Here

identified as:

Component 1 - Financial Problems.

This component had a high loading on the items related to insufficient financial aid, insufficient financial resources, and problems in finding a part-time job.

Component 2 - Academic Access Problems.

This component had high loadings on the items related to not being able to enroll in a desired major or in desired courses.

Component 3 - Living Arrangement Problems.

This component had a high loading on the items relating to difficulty in commuting to the College and finding a suitable place to live. It was also related to the desire to find a college closer to home.

Component 4 - Achievement Problems.

This component was related to boredom with courses and a lack of academic success. It also influenced the student's choice of the reason of dissatisfaction with academic problems and requirements.

Component 5 - Changes in Career Orientation.

This component was most closely related to the item relating to changes in career goals, to a lesser extent it influenced the reason for desiring to attend a college closer to home.

Component 6 - Non-college Distractions.

This component had high loadings on the item related to receiving an attractive job offer and the need to meet family responsibilities.

Component 7 - Health Problems.

This component was primarily related to becoming ill and being unable to complete academic work.

These seven components represent seven independent underlying reasons that students have for leaving the College. They were validated by examining the response that students gave to the incomplete sentences in relationship to their scores on each

TABLE 4

Varimax Rotated Factors of the Reason Given for Withdrawal

REASON[a]	COMPONENT[b] I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	h^2
6. insufficient financial aid	.84							.73
4. insufficient financial resources	.80						.34	.77
5. part-time job	.76					.37		.73
9. could not enroll in major		.80						.69
10. could not enroll in courses		.76						.62
14. commute to college			.81					.68
15. place to live			.77					.66
1. bored with courses				.71				.60
3. not doing well academically				.70				.65
11. not satisfied with program		-.37		.53			.31	.57
7. dissatisfied with academic requirements			.40	.46	-.39			.58
8. changed career goal					.84			.76
16. school closer to home			.49		.50			.57
12. received job offer						.79		.73
2. family responsibilities						.68	.39	.73
13. became ill							.89	.82

a Numbered in order administered
b Loading less than .30 in magnitude omitted

of the components.

Component scores were computed for each subject so that the mean was 50 and the standard deviation was 10 using conventional techniques; thus, for each subject, the 16 reasons for withdrawal were reduced to 7 scores which had the mathematical property of being uncorrelated. These scores were used in the subsequent analyses.

Pattern of interrelationship between student characteristics, reasons for withdrawal and plans for the future. The interrelationships shown in the figure were established through the application of PATH analysis, a specialized

Insert Figure About Here

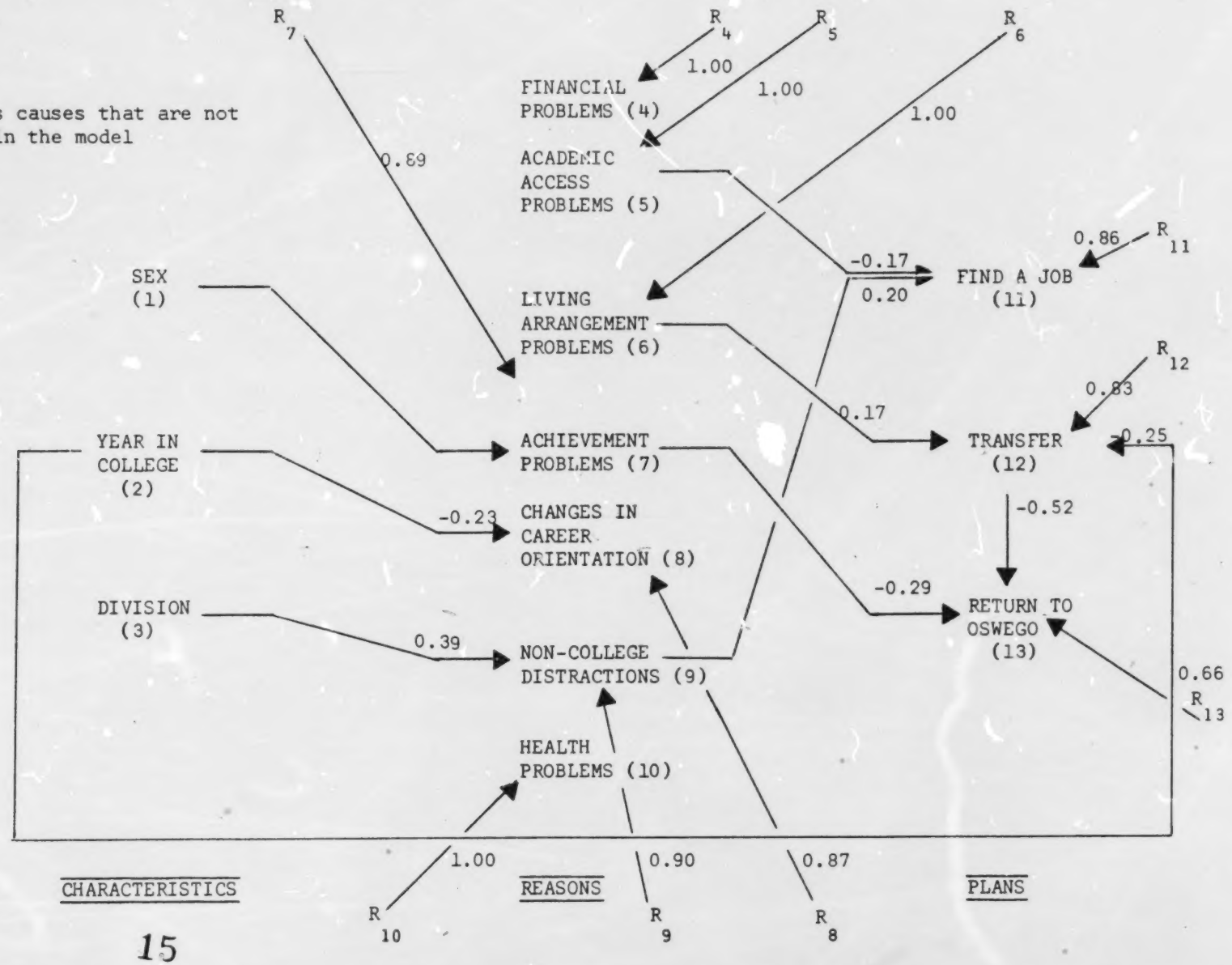
regression procedure. We began by hypothesizing a relationship between a student's class and division and then hypothesizing that student characteristics would have a direct causal effect on the score on each of the 7 uncorrelated reasons, and finally, by hypothesizing that student characteristics and reasons would have an effect on future plans. In addition, we hypothesized that the decision to transfer to another college would have an effect on the decision to return to Oswego. We tested these hypotheses and eliminated those relationships which could not be substantiated statistically. We recomputed the relationships after eliminating those that were insignificant. The results are shown in the figure.

Read the figure as if it were a flow chart. Arrows point from causes to effects, the sign shows the direction or nature of relationship, the value shows the strength of the relationship.

FIGURE

PATH Diagram Illustrating the Relationship Between Student Characteristics, Reasons for Withdrawal, and Plans

R_n represents causes that are not included in the model



On the basis of the PATH analysis, we can conclude that: there are small but significant relationships between student characteristics and the reasons given for the withdrawal, and further that the characteristics and reasons given have a small but significant relationship to future plans. This analysis suggests that there are many other influences on the reasons than students give on their plans for the future than are contained in the reasons as defined by the component scores.

Suggestions from students on the reduction of attrition. The students, when responding freely, made some suggestions that might be useful to us in planning to increase retention. We asked them to complete the sentence,

I PROBABLY WOULD NOT HAVE WITHDRAWN IF THE COLLEGE HAD_____

_____

Ninety-seven took advantage of the opportunity to provide this information. Their responses were organized into 11 broad categories which are presented below along with a random sample of the responses within each category. Here is what the students told us:

A. Seeking a program that was not available at Oswego

Number - 16 responses (16.5% of those responding)

"a social work major." (Male, junior, Sociology major, transferring to SUNY Utica-Rome)

"had a specialized accounting major." (Male, sophomore, Business Administration, transfer to another, unspecified college)

"offered the major I wish to take up now - recreation." (Female, junior, Elementary Education, transfer to Brockport or Cortland)

B. Encountered financial difficulties

Number - 13 responses (13.4% of those responding)

"cheaper rates." (Male, junior, Mathematics, Transfer to another unspecified, college)

"been able to give me a little more help with my financial aid." (Female, sophomore, English/writing arts, return to Oswego - Fall 1978)

"been able to provide financial aid." (Female, sophomore, Education(?), transfer for a semester, return in the summer)

C. Seeking to attend college in another location

Number - 12 (12.4% of those responding)

"been closer to home and friends." (Female, junior, Elementary Education, transfer to SUNY Fredonia)

"been closer to my fiance's home." (Male, junior, Business Administration, transfer to another, unspecified, college)

"been in Rochester." (Female, freshman, Psychology, transfer to Nazareth College)

D. Seeking a different environment

Number - 12 (12.4% of those responding)

"better weather and less partying." (Female, sophomore, Public Justice, transfer to SUNY Farmingdale)

"better atmosphere to study." (Male, junior, Biology, transfer to another, unspecified, college)

"a good geology department and more academic atmosphere." (Male, sophomore, Geology, transfer to University of Massachusetts at Amherst)

E. Seeking a college with different emphasis

Number - 8 (8.2% of those responding)

"been more concerned about the individual student." (Male, class unknown, Business Administration, transfer to "none of your business")

"better advisement and not enrolled more students than on-campus or LOCO could handle to have a bigger budget." (Male, junior, Social Sciences, transfer to another, unspecified, college)

"fulfilled my expectations." (Male, freshman, English and History, transfer to another, unspecified, college)

F. Seeking educational counseling or assistance

Number - 8 (8.2% of those responding)

"I seen other students with my major getting decent jobs after college." (Male, junior, Biology, plans to get a job)

"offered a more job oriented program." (Female, sophomore, Communications Studies, plans to get a job)

"a special program if a student is academically discouraged." (Male, sophomore, undecided, transfer to New York Institute of Technology)

G. Seeking specific course offerings

Number - 7 (7.2% of those responding)

"offered more field related experiences in early-childhood education." (Female, sophomore, Elementary Education, transfer to Syracuse University)

"provided more courses I was interested in." (Male, sophomore, Political Science, plans to get a job)

"been able to fit me into the courses that I needed." (Female, junior, Psychology, transfer to Wittenberg University)

H. Seeking a degree in Business Administration

Number - 6 (6.2% of those responding)

"let me into business. I think the fact that they don't accept students from the school into the program is really lousey; they should come first. (Female, sophomore, undecided, transfer to Boston University)

"been able to fit into Business courses during the regular year." (Female, junior, Public Justice, return during summer 1978)

"been able to get into Business." (Male, sophomore, Biology, transfer to Plattsburgh)

I. Seeking more appropriate housing accommodations

Number - 4 (4.1% of those responding)

"released me from Wine Creek or attempted to solve problems." (Male, junior, Industrial Arts, return in Fall 1978)

"I had not been in a triple." (Female, freshman, Anthropology, transfer to Adirondack Community College)

"I had been able to move off campus." (Female, senior, Geography/ Social Science, return to Oswego in Spring 1978)

J. Temporary withdrawal to take part in an overseas program

Number - 4 (4.1% of those responding)

The comments for this group were not revealing; however, the group included students who were planning to attend:

London Institute - 2
University of Copenhagen
England in a SUNY Fredonia sponsored program

K. Encountering family problems

Number - 2 (2.1% of those responding)

"had been easier and if I had not had family problems." (Male, senior, Psychology, return to Oswego in Fall 1978)

"my family comes before me." (Male, sophomore, Public Justice, return to Oswego in Fall 1978)

L. Seeking a better athletic program

Number - 2 (2.1% of those responding)

"more courses and a better athletic program." (Male, sophomore, Applied Mathematical Economics, transfer to the University of Maryland)

"not used political pull athletically." (Male, freshman, undecided, transfer to Geneseo)

M. Seeking a more intense academic major

Number - 2 (2.1% of those responding)

"put more emphasis on my academic major (credit-wise) and not on 90 liberal arts credits." (Female, junior, Art, transfer to Brooklyn College)

"been more into my major." (Male, junior, Psychology, transfer to another, unspecified, college)

The parallel between the categories and the components is striking. Such areas as financial problems, academic access problems, living arrangement problems, and non-college distractions are clearly identifiable. Some new sources of

of attrition emerged from the examination, including references to the need for a more compatible academic environment, the need for educational counseling or assistance, and withdrawal for administrative reasons, particularly in reference to participation in an overseas program. The parallel suggests that the reasons given in the questionnaire were at least partially, "on target" but there are difficulties in forcing student responses into a framework built upon the impressions of staff members and researchers of the reasons that students withdraw. Clearly the quantitative portion of this study should be modified to more accurately reflect the students' process of making the decision to leave. In particular, attention should be paid to the treatment of the individual by the College and by other students. In fact, the peer group influence was wholly omitted from the reasons provided in this present study.

On the basis of the responses to the incomplete sentence, it is clear that this omission was damaging.

Discussion and Conclusions

Let us begin by looking back over the study. We established:

A. That students did not withdraw in equal numbers on the basis of their class, but that the relationship between number of withdrawals and sex and division was within the range that might be expected.

B. That relationship between the student's major or concentration and the decision to withdraw was weak when enrollment was taken into account.

C. That students most frequently indicated that they withdrew because they were not satisfied with their academic program, had changed their career goal, or had insufficient financial resources.

D. That the decision to withdraw was made on the basis of the student's attempt to solve at least one, or as many as seven, independent problems or concerns.

E. That there was a weak but significant relationship between student characteristics, the underlying reasons for withdrawal, and the student's plans for the future.

F. That the reasons given to each free response item were related to

the reasons given in the checklist but that the checklist failed to tape several important reasons for withdrawal.

One way of drawing these reasons together is to refer to the theory of personal development during late adolescence.

When students enter the College as freshmen, they are still in the process of completing a number of developmental tasks: the development of vocational goals and plans, the establishment of patterns of marriage and family, and the establishment of independence. Further, they are at the end of the process of developing a distinctive pattern of peer group relationships. For the most part, college freshmen have not completed these tasks that they must accomplish if they are to reach maturity.

As they begin to hypothesize new vocational roles, they seek to test themselves in a number of fields which yields eventually to a narrowing or focusing of vocational interests. The choice of Oswego, which might have been a rational one at the end of high school, may no longer be appropriate and students may need to transfer in order to take advantage of curricula that may be closest to them.

It is difficult to establish independent status when finances are controlled by some agency external to the individual such as parents or government. Consequently, financial difficulties go beyond mere economics and are likely to effect the psychological development of the individual. Loans in particular create ambivalence for many for they tend to extend the period of dependence long beyond the age of psychological maturity.

Finally, values are still plastic and are susceptible to manipulation, particularly by the peer group. Certain values that may be important to the individual are not informed with the values prevalent among students on campus. This may force the individual to choose a different pattern; for example, for some of our students, the emphasis placed on intellectuality in the academic life exceeds their own interest and they find it necessary to leave the institution either for strictly vocational training or to find a job in order to

adjust the environment to their needs. Others seek a greater emphasis on intellectual activity and look toward more prestigious institutions to provide it for them. At the present time we have no mechanism for providing students with assistance in overcoming the obstacles toward the completion of the critical developmental tasks of late adolescence. For those who are having extreme difficulty, the efforts of the Student Services Center may provide relief, but for those with minor difficulties, there are few readily accessible places where they can find help.

The most widely accepted answer to the problem of increasing retention through providing students with assistance in meeting developmental tasks seems to be through intrusive counseling. Certainly the results of this study do not indicate any broad or sweeping changes in the policies of the institution which will have a clear impact on the rate of retention. The answer must lie elsewhere.